

matters to me. I can open myself up to love you because I feel safe with you and valued by you." The exercises in this chapter should help you restore this basic sense of security. But you need to learn more—for example, how to communicate more constructively, how to renew sexual intimacy, how to forgive. The rest of this book takes you on this greater journey.

SEVEN

How to Talk About What Happened

Many couples make the mistake of thinking they can rebuild their relationship after an affair simply by having enjoyable, positive experiences together. Although good times are critical to healing—you need to make room for playing and relaxing—they're no substitute for talking out your pain and dissatisfaction, and being listened to and understood. Unless you open yourself to your partner's feelings and communicate your own, your positive interactions will be like frosting on a stale cake. Let's turn, then, to the subject of this chapter: how to talk and listen more intimately—how to talk in a way that lets your partner know who you are and what you need, and listen in a way that encourages your partner to be open and vulnerable with you.

Learning constructive communication techniques is the easy part (I list several of them at the end of the chapter); being *willing to use them* is the challenge. "I know exactly what I should say to my partner to turn the whole argument around," you

may say, "but I'll be damned if I'll do it." Behind your resistance are likely to be certain long-held, dysfunctional assumptions about talking and listening—assumptions such as, "If I tell you how you've hurt me I'll push you even further away," or "If I listen, you'll think I agree with you." Unless you confront these assumptions, learning new techniques will be like shuffling deck chairs on the *Titanic*.

INTIMATE TALK

It's time now for honest, personal, and deeply revealing talk about the affair, not only if it was recently revealed, but also if you went through the trauma long ago and never discussed it in any depth. Unless you drag it out of the closet—out from between the two of you—you'll never give it a proper burial. It's also time to talk about old grievances. For some of you, this means going beyond depression to unleash your unacknowledged fury. For others, it means going beyond fury to convey your unacknowledged sadness, fear, or shame. All of you must admit your share of mistakes for what went wrong.

Two Dysfunctional Ways of Talking: Silence and Storm

There are two common, dysfunctional ways of managing your thoughts and feelings. One is to silence yourself—to keep everything bottled up inside. The other is to storm—to emote without restraint. Let's look at them, and at the assumptions that feed them.

Silence

If you're having too many conversations in your own mind, you're probably not having enough conversations with the person you should be talking to—your partner. Silence may insulate you from further harm or disappointment, but it may also rob you of the chance to feel understood, have your needs satisfied, admit your mistakes, and reconnect. Disclosing what you feel and need is an act of love, a prelude to intimacy. Speaking your mind "by telling all one's heart" is not only an act of

ordinary courage, as Annie Rogers calls it,¹ it's basic to letting your partner back into your life.

Let's look at two common assumptions that may block your ability to speak up:

1. "If I tell you what's bothering me, it will push us further apart."
2. "If I admit how I contribute to our problems, you'll think less of me or hold it against me."

Assumption #1: "If I tell you what's bothering me, it will push us further apart."

The Hurt Partner

You may be so pleased to have your partner back that you'll do anything not to risk being abandoned again, even if it means bottling up your rage and inner chaos. But topics not aired don't evaporate; they poison the space between you.

"For me to feel close to Howard again," one hurt partner said, "our marriage has to change. I need to feel more than safe. I need to be able to be myself, and that means talking openly about my feelings. But Howard doesn't want to talk, and I'm afraid to annoy him. He tells me, 'Then was then, now is now; I just want to move on.' So I don't push it. But we don't move on, either."

"A year after Joe's affair ended, I heard that his girlfriend had a baby," another hurt partner told me. "Ever since, I've been secretly gathering information about her from my daughter, who works in the same department. Is Joe the father? I can't help wondering. Every time I look at him, I'm dying to ask, but I don't. I can't. So it sits between us—the child he wouldn't have with me, the child he may have given her."

For you to heal and forgive, you must be convinced that your partner grasps how deeply you've been violated. For that to happen, you must talk about the affair and how it has affected you on the most personal level. It may help to refer to the list of nine losses in Chapter 1 and to discuss which ones you've

experienced since the affair was revealed. Don't bludgeon your partner with your anger to avenge your losses or to detract from your complicity, but let your partner see what's going on inside you as a step toward reconciliation. *When you let your partner hold your pain, you can begin to let it go.*

The Unfaithful Partner

You may silence yourself to avoid conflict, but don't confuse peace with intimacy. Keeping your discontent to yourself is not loving or protective; it only leaves you both vulnerable to another betrayal. If you're waiting for a less volatile time to speak up, forget it; time will not make your task any easier. Vent your concerns now, or the cancer will grow.

Vanessa knew she was miserable months before she took on a lover, but said nothing. Instead, she lamely invited her husband to spend time grocery shopping and running errands with her. Her husband, oblivious to the mounting crisis, politely turned her down. What Vanessa didn't tell him was, "Look, I'm lonely. I need more of you. You're totally absorbed in your job and I feel irrelevant to you. This is serious. Listen to me." If he still didn't get it, she could have told him, "I'm thinking of having an affair. I'm finding myself attracted to other men"; or "I'm thinking of leaving you. I'm telling you not to threaten you but to keep us together."

If Vanessa had revealed herself sooner and with more directness, she might not have needed to seek companionship elsewhere. But it was hard for her to speak up when she had been taught all her life to silence her discontent. "Silence is golden," "Don't rock the boat," "Fighting's not worth it," "Things will clear up on their own, over time"—these were the messages she was raised on. What no one told her was, "No conflict, no closeness; confront your grievances or you'll be left with nothing but the illusion of tranquility."

Assumption #2: "If I admit how I contribute to our problems, you'll think less of me or hold it against me."

The Hurt Partner

You may have a hard time admitting complicity, given how betrayed and violated you probably feel, but your acceptance of an appropriate share of responsibility will release you, at least in part, from the role of victim. It can be empowering to know that, instead of waiting passively for your partner to change, you, too, can do things to make a difference.

The Unfaithful Partner

You may be equally reluctant to accept responsibility, but your partner needs to know that you understand and regret the harm you've inflicted. If you were selfish or insensitive, or if you were led on by unrealistic expectations and excessive needs that were beyond your partner's (or anyone's) responsibility or capacity to fulfill, now's the time to admit it and apologize. Remember, *the single most precious gift that you can give your partner as reassurance that you won't stray again is your willingness to delve into yourself, confront your personal issues that led to the affair, and acknowledge them openly and responsibly.*

Here's what some of my patients said to begin this process; you'll want to search for explanations of your own:

- "I fell apart when my business began to fail. I felt totally humiliated."
- "When Mom died, I didn't know how to reach out to you and tell you how miserable and alone I felt, how much I needed you."
- "I never confronted your anger, just as I never confronted my father's. I was the wimp, and I let you step on me. I hated you for that because it was easier than hating myself."
- "I never felt attractive, sexy, or smart. I relied on the flattery of other women to make me feel desirable."
- "Frankly, I don't know why I had the affair, but I'll get into therapy and find out and share what I learn with you. It's

partially your job to make me happy, but it's not your job to keep me faithful. I'll take care of that—I promise."

You both may be loath to reveal what you profoundly regret or feel ashamed of—it may seem to make you less lovable, more open to attack. But the opposite is usually true.

I remember how painful it was for me to learn this lesson, back in fifth grade, when infidelity, I thought, meant not being able to make a baby. I had just gotten my first pair of eyeglasses. As I went off to a sleepover pajama party, my parents warned me to take good care of them. I tried. But when it came time to bed down, I couldn't find a safe place to put them among the blankets on the basement floor, so I stuck them under my pillow, thinking no one would step on it. I was wrong. When I returned home the next day, I was worried that my parents would be angry at me, and apprehensive about admitting my stupidity, so I made light of my mistake. "You're never going to believe what happened," I crowed as I walked through the door. "You were right!" And I held up my smashed lenses. Well, of course, my parents were furious—not because my glasses were broken, but because I came across in such a cavalier, irresponsible, arrogant way. If I had revealed my true self, I would have said to them, "Look, I feel terrible about these glasses. I really did try to take care of them but used bad judgment. I know they're expensive, and I'm sorry for what happened." They would have forgiven me, I'm sure.

Candor and self-scrutiny can be just as disarming for you, and make you seem more likable, more human, in your partner's eyes. It can also make your partner less defensive, and, in turn, more willing to confront his or her own contribution to the affair. The more you blame your partner, the less responsibility your partner is likely to assume. Allow yourself to be vulnerable and you invite your partner to be vulnerable, too.

Storm

When you silence yourself, you muzzle your discontent; when you storm, you assault your partner with it. Behind the storm,

as behind the silence, may be certain maladaptive assumptions that give you permission to vent without control, and virtually guarantee that your partner will ignore you or fight back. Let's look at a few of these assumptions:

1. "I need to get my feelings off my chest—it's unhealthy to censor them."
2. "Unless I rage, you won't hear me or understand my pain."
3. "I am who I am."
4. "I have to feel satisfied before I stop."

Assumption #1: "I need to get my feelings off my chest—it's unhealthy to censor them."

Some therapists still argue that the unrestrained expression of emotion is cathartic—a kind of verbal blood-letting that exorcises poisonous feelings trapped inside you. However, most professionals today believe that the relentless, uncontrolled outpouring of anger breeds only more anger, both in the partner who is venting and in the partner who is under attack.²

I'm not suggesting that you should always lower the volume or that it's always bad or wrong to storm. Your partner can't understand your experience if you wrap it in a smile. Unremitting rage is off-putting, though, and by modulating your voice and choosing your words carefully, you give your partner no excuse *not* to listen. You may need to release bitter feelings before you can cultivate more loving ones, but there are ways of doing this that don't create more bitterness. (I list some of them under Suggestions at the end of the chapter.)

Assumption #2: "Unless I rage, you won't hear me or understand my pain."

You may automatically assume that the squeaky wheel gets the oil; that to be heard you need to be dramatic and make a scene. You may be right—your partner may refuse to pay attention to you unless you rave, and then write you off as crazy or unrea-

sonable. When this happens, you're left with no adaptive outlet and are bound to feel even more infuriated.

But you may be wrong—your raging, even if it gets attention, may shove your partner away and leave you feeling more lonely and unsupported than before. If you speak more calmly and directly, your partner may listen to you more closely and feel your pain or discontent more palpably than when you storm.

Martha could have told her unfaithful husband, "You exposed me to a life-threatening disease because you're a selfish pig. You've never cared about anyone except yourself." What she said instead was, "I don't feel safe inside my own body. Do you understand how crazy that makes me feel? You could have exposed me to AIDS. I can't imagine what could have been so important for you to have put my life at risk."

Assumption #3: "I am who I am."

You may insist that you're an "emotional person" who can only relate in the fiery way you do. Such labels, though, are only excuses to justify dysfunctional behavior and give you license to storm. If you want to get your message across, you need to stop hiding behind the false and convenient assumption that you can't change.

Assumption #4: "I have to feel satisfied before I stop."

Many of you get drawn into conflict and then can't disengage principally because you assume you must feel satisfied before you stop. This idea forces you to stay locked in battle long after the troops should have gone home. The problem with this strategy is that it's likely to leave your partner feeling battered and defensive, and unwilling to concede your argument or discuss it with you further. If you want to be heard, you need to stop once you're understood, whether you feel satisfied or not. Don't think that by slugging it out and going one more round you'll drive your point home. You're more likely to get jabbed back, or send your partner fleeing from the ring.

A word of precaution: The rage that the affair has unleashed

may lead to violence against your partner or against yourself. Some of you, even those with no history of physical abuse, may find yourselves unable to control it, and act in ways that shock and endanger you.

Torben and Kathy found themselves unable to talk rationally about his affair. One night before bed she became hysterical and threatened to kill herself. Torben, overcome with guilt, held a knife up to his throat and told her, "Finish me off. I'm bad." While Kathy stalked into the bathroom for a bottle of sedatives, Torben smashed a dish on the floor. A chip flew up into his face, ripping open his lip. They both stopped and looked at each other, dumbfounded. "My God," they thought. "What are we doing? What's happening to us?"

These flare-ups, as extreme and uncharacteristic as they may seem, frequently follow in the turbulent wake of an affair. At a time when your emotions are roiled up, your sense of self-traumatized, your relationship ruptured, you must learn to recognize the early signs of escalating violence, and disengage before your confrontations spin out of control. Don't drink and fight; alcohol will only intensify your hostility. Don't threaten divorce; your relationship is too fragile to tolerate this kind of intimidation. If you see that your emotions are overheating, remind yourself that you may not have the communication skills or self-control to discuss a subject as flammable as infidelity, and step back from whatever it is that's upsetting you. Call a temporary truce with words such as, "I can feel the tension mounting between us. Let's agree to stop here and get back together at five tonight to talk more. I really do want to hear what you have to say."

It's important to agree to disengage, but also to agree to re-engage at a specified time, so that the person who is venting doesn't feel shut out.

How Your Past Affects the Way You Talk Today

To understand why you silence yourself or storm, look back at how your family communicated with you and with one an-

other. From these interactions you learned ways of expressing yourself. Here are a few examples:

- Your parents were always screaming at each other, and you grew up fearing confrontation.
- You had several feisty siblings who taught you that the only way to be heard is to shout.
- You learned from a self-effacing mother to silence your needs.
- You learned from an explosive, overbearing father to rail back.
- You learned from a critical mother that the way to win approval is to say what others want to hear, and ignore your own voice.
- You learned from an absent father that to get attention you have to nag, scream, or cry.

When you communicate with your partner today, you're likely to reenact scenes from your childhood that reinforce these early lessons. If you grew up feeling misunderstood, for example, you may silence what you need and guarantee that your partner doesn't understand you. If you grew up feeling unsupported, you may yell and make sure that your partner doesn't listen.

Breaking these lifelong patterns may seem risky, like swimming in unprotected waters. But by taking the plunge, you free yourself to interact in more intimate ways and allow your partner to hear you and take your needs seriously, perhaps for the first time.

Here are two contrasting scenarios. In one of them, Curtis is stuck in silence. In the other, Sarah talks back to her silence, and works to overcome it.

Scenario #1: Curtis and Alice

Curtis and Alice both brought into their marriage a maladaptive style of communicating. It was a perfect fit, each allowing

the other to play out a well-rehearsed role, until Curtis's affair brought the curtain down.

Curtis's dominant father took care of his family and created a home environment that was ostensibly conflict-free. If Curtis ever felt resentful, he never acknowledged it to anyone, including himself. When he married Alice, he put up the same sweet, self-effacing facade that he presented to the world in his youth. He submitted to her wishes, as he had submitted to his father's, and taught her to ignore his needs. His married life seemed conflict-free.

Alice also grew up with a domineering father, but rather than shy away from him, she learned to sling back insults as fast as they were thrown. She and her father fought hard and often. In her marriage, she stepped into her father's shoes and frequently found herself storming at Curtis for being so soft and unassertive. She came to despise him for not standing up to her.

Twenty years into their marriage, when Curtis mismanaged a major business investment, Alice blasted him with contempt. Curtis said nothing, but then expressed his stored rage by leaving her and moving in with his accountant. When I saw him two months later, he was still furious at Alice for not supporting him. "After a lifetime of catering to her moods," he told me, "the *one time* I asked for something back she had nothing to give." I pointed out that in their years together he had never given her any warning, any corrective feedback, that he was unhappy, or asked her to be accountable to him. Never had he said, "Listen up. I need you now. I've been there for you, and if you can't find the compassion and humanity to be there for me, I'm leaving you." I asked him how, after so many years of teaching her *not* to be there for him, he could expect her to act differently.

Curtis could still have opened himself up to Alice—she deeply regretted the way she had treated him and wanted him back—but he silenced himself, as usual, and continued to attend to his needs alone, outside the relationship.

Scenario #2: Sarah and John

Sarah's story has a more satisfying ending. Growing up with a diabetic mother, she assumed the role of the invisible child, never imposing her needs on anyone. Her anger built up on occasion to what George Eliot called "the roar which lies on the other side of silence," but she always ended up feeling guilty and retreating into herself. In her marriage to John, she maintained this same alternating pattern of silence and storm.

Almost a year after coming clean about his affair with his secretary, John announced that he was staying late for an office Christmas party and invited Sarah to join him. She was livid. "You're obviously still seeing that girl," she raged. "If you were proud of me and wanted me to be there, you wouldn't have waited till the last minute to invite me, when you knew it was too late for me to go."

John, feeling battered, insisted that he had forgotten about the party simply because it meant nothing to him and he was swamped with work. Sarah wanted to believe his story but continued to trounce him.

That night, after John returned early from the party, Sarah wanted to make peace with him, but silence got in the way. "John's way of handling conflict was, as usual, to go to sleep instantly," she told me the next day. "I knew he'd be snoring any minute and I'd be up all night obsessing. By morning I'd feel sick and even more furious at him. We wouldn't talk all day, and by the time he got home from work I'd be a raving maniac. I really needed to feel close to him before I could go to sleep, but my old silent self just lay there, afraid to move. 'You idiot,' I told myself, 'why can't you just say you're sorry and ask him to hug you? You always have trouble asking for anything—why is it so hard? Talk to him.'"

"And I did. I turned to him and said, pathetically—are you ready for this?—'I can't sleep. Do you mind if I turn the bed light on, so I can read?' 'No, that's fine,' he said, and closed his eyes.

"I lay there thinking, 'I can't believe you! The last thing you

want is to read. Get your act together. Tell him what you want.' So I shook him awake and said, 'John, this is stupid. I feel terrible about our fight tonight—insecure about us, angry at myself for picking a fight with you. Please don't go to bed and leave me stranded. Just hold me.'

"John opened his eyes, smiled, and made a space beside him. This time I accepted his invitation.

"It's hard to believe how difficult it was, simply speaking up for myself. I had to overcome something deep inside me that sealed me off. I had lived my whole life that way, silencing myself or blowing up. When I finally found my own voice, I gave John a chance to be there for me, and I experienced myself in a new way—more connected, more supported."

Saying Goodbye to the Affair-Person

Many unfaithful partners choose to stop seeing their lovers without the formality of a goodbye. Whatever your reason—guilt, fear of temptation or confrontation—your partner is left believing that you're ambivalent about returning home and determined to keep your options open. This is not the best climate for restoring trust. Should the lover write or call, you and your partner are guaranteed a blow-up every time.

There are three good ways to communicate your recommitment to your partner. First, you must say goodbye to the affair-person in no uncertain terms. Don't try to protect this person by saying nothing or softening your words; leave no room for doubt. Make it clear that you want him or her to move on to another, more fulfilling relationship. Second, you must promise your partner that you'll never contact the affair-person again; or, if that's not possible, you must promise to keep encounters as infrequent and impersonal as you can. Third, if your partner wants to be told every time you and the affair-person cross paths, you must comply; otherwise, the truth may come out accidentally and seem like a secret you were trying to hide.

Talking About the Affair

When talking about the affair, hurt partners need to decide what they want to know, and unfaithful partners need to decide how to reveal it. These are potentially explosive issues that should be thought through before any conversation takes place.

The Hurt Partner

Knowing that the affair-person shares secrets with your partner—that the two of them know things you don’t—may seem intolerable, and make you insist on being told every excruciating detail.

The problem with too vivid a picture is that it’s likely to torment you and feed rather than satisfy your obsession. Your fascination is understandable, but before you begin the inquisition I advise you to write down your questions and ask yourself, “Will answers help me—will they help *us*—recover? Will they clean the slate or stir the pot? What is it that I want my questions to achieve?”

“I wasn’t so bothered that Jack was collecting X-rated pictures of women,” a patient named Tracey told me. “But when I found images of people having anal sex, I began to wonder if he did these things with his kinky girlfriend. I decided not to ask him because I wouldn’t know what to do with the answer—there’s only so much enlightenment a person can take. But I did need to find out if he could ever be satisfied making love with me, given that there are limits to what I’ll do to make him happy.”

Most hurt partners, unlike Tracey, have a knack of going after information that will make them suffer. “Do you still think about her?” “Did you enjoy sex with him more than with me?” “Do you ever think about her when we make love together?” “Do you have any doubts about our future together?”—these are the sorts of self-destructive questions that only drive the knife in deeper. What’s the point?

When hurt partners become experts in entrapment, every-

one loses. A thirty-six-year-old production editor named Jill was no exception. “Howard’s affair [with his sales rep] had been over for two years,” she told me, “but I still felt the need to check on him. He had promised to keep his conversations with her light. After a sales meeting, I tried to trip him up. I started off slowly, like I was smelling his tracks. I asked him, ‘Have you seen Janet lately?’ I knew he had, and he admitted it. And then, laying my bait: ‘Is she still seeing that boy from Arizona?’ If he knew the answer, I’d know their conversation had crossed the line. But Howard tried to move the subject to safer ground. ‘I’m flattered that you think such a young girl could still be interested in me,’ he said. I wasn’t going to let him off so easily, so I shot back, ‘Actually, you’re the one who seems flattered that such a young thing would be interested in you.’ I kept at him until he threw up his hands and walked out of the house. There was nothing he could have said to reassure me, I realized. I was going to nail him, whether he was guilty or not.”

The best advice I can give you is to keep the focus on your relationship, not on the affair-person. Try to ask questions such as, “What do you need from me to feel more loved and cared for?” “What’s missing in this relationship for you?” and “How do you like to be touched?”—questions that will help you get the affair, and your obsessions about the affair-person, behind you.

A patient named Ann came to this same understanding. “When I heard about Frank’s fling,” she told me, “I wanted to march into the slut’s office and humiliate her the way she humiliated me. I wanted to scream in front of all her customers that she’s a fucking whore. But I decided not to lower myself, and wrote her a letter instead. I wanted her to know I’m a real person with real feelings, and what she did was wrong. I didn’t send it, though, because the truth is, she’s not the problem, and she’s not the solution. Whether she ever understands what she did to me, or ever even acknowledges my existence, isn’t going to help me or my marriage.”

The Unfaithful Partner

When it comes to answering questions about the affair-person, I believe that it's the person you betrayed, not you, who has the right to decide what you reveal. You should respond in whatever detail your partner wants. If you try to hide or soften the truth to protect your partner's feelings, you're likely to be seen as controlling, evasive, or deceptive. Go ahead and point out that the truth can hurt more than heal, but don't expect your partner to listen to your advice or trust your judgment.

Respecting your partner's wishes is not, of course, a license to be cruel. Choose your words with sensitivity, and try to give feedback that will point your relationship in a positive direction. If your wife asks, "Am I as good a lover?" it would be pointless and callous simply to say, "No." It would be entirely instructive, however, to say, "Sex was better with her and me than it's been with us for the past few years, but that's because it was forbidden and because sometimes I feel you don't want to be with me."

INTIMATE LISTENING

Intimate listening means putting your own feelings and beliefs on hold, stepping into your partner's world, and seeing yourself, and the affair, from your partner's point of view. It means asking yourself, nondefensively, noncompetitively, "What is my partner trying to convey to me? What does this person want me to understand?"

To listen meaningfully, you need to see your partner not as the enemy but as someone who also may be hurting, and whose message to you is not "You're awful," but "You matter to me. I need you to understand." You may want to remind yourself that you're not discussing the Truth, in some ultimate sense, but two different ways of looking at it. Your partner's take on things may be different from yours, but if you're ever going to get closer, you have to learn to hear it.

An unfaithful partner named Marsha found that entering into her partner's mindset did not come naturally, but she

coached herself to do it. When her husband, Bob, told her, "You don't make me feel loved," her first instinct was to lunge back, "What! After all I do for you!" But instead, she tried to enter into his misery and show interest. "It upsets me to hear you say that," she said. "What do I do that makes you feel that way?" To herself she said, "Let him talk. He's revealing something important about himself—and perhaps about you. It doesn't matter whether you think he's wrong or unfair. If you want to get closer, you need to listen and try to appreciate what he's saying."

There are many ways of letting your partner know you're listening, but I recommend two in particular. They're called the Cross-Over Technique and the Disarming Technique.

The Cross-Over Technique

Couples often fight without knowing what they're fighting about, or rush in to dispute their partner's point of view before they understand it. The Cross-Over Technique is meant to help you, the listener, hear what your partner is saying, and you, the speaker, feel that you're being heard.

Here's how it works. When you're discussing a subject and one of you starts to get irritated or upset, either you or your partner calls a stop, and the two of you "cross over." This means that you both stop pressing your points—stop pushing your positions onto each other—and try to enter each other's phenomenological world. "So this is what *you* want *me* to understand," you say, in effect, as you try to paraphrase or mirror the most significant aspects of your partner's message, both in content and spirit. Your partner then rates how completely he or she feels you got the message, on a scale of one to ten. Nine is a pass. If you fail, your partner repeats the part of the message you didn't seem to hear, and you try to "capture" it, as many times as necessary, until your partner is satisfied. Don't be insulted or frustrated if you don't get high grades at first. It's often only after you mirror back the message that your partner realizes what he or she didn't say; you may not have heard it be-

cause it was never said. A distraught partner may also need you to repeat the message several times before feeling understood.

Roberta and Neil had difficulty negotiating how to spend their free time; when they tried to talk it out, they ended up not talking at all. Neil (the hurt partner) often wanted more time together; Roberta often wanted less. Neil saw her as cold and rejecting; she saw him as insecure and needy. One day, when she insisted on going off by herself to run errands, their tempers flared. Neil, applying the Cross-Over Technique, listened to her closely and then tried to mirror back what she said. "You'd like me to let you go off by yourself some of the time and not take it as personal rejection," he said. "You see my wanting to be with you as a way of checking up on you and reassuring myself that you're not cheating on me again. This doesn't feel loving to you; it feels imprisoning."

Roberta, in turn, listened to Neil and mirrored his sentiments: "You want me to understand that I create a lot of your insecurity by constantly pushing you away, and never making you feel special to me. You'd feel better about letting me go off by myself if some of the time I sought you out to do fun things with me."

Both partners had listened well, and both felt heard.

The Disarming Technique

This other listening technique³ reduces your sense of polarization on any given issue, and helps you find some common ground to stand on. Like the Cross-Over Technique, it helps to deescalate conflict by forcing you to concentrate on what your partner is telling you rather than on what you plan to say in your defense.

In this exercise, you take turns ferreting out the truth in your partner's position—the part you genuinely agree with—and acknowledging it in a gracious and convincing way.

Ed and Miriam clashed over his working for the same company as his ex-lover, Sandy. One day, during a couples session in my office, I asked them to try the Disarming Technique. In-

stead of defending himself or trying to duck a confrontation, Ed acknowledged what he believed to be true in Miriam's position. "My situation at work must drive you crazy," he told her. "It's got to be even harder for you to trust me and stop obsessing about Sandy when you know I'll be running into her every day. I can understand how you'd like me to find a job somewhere else, even if I earn less."

Hearing Ed validate her point of view made it easier for Miriam to do the same for him. "I realize you're in a bind," she said, "that you want to please me but worry about finding a good job somewhere else. I know I say the money doesn't matter to me, but then I spend plenty. It's got to be hard to leave a good, secure job. It takes more energy and confidence than you feel you've got right now."

It was a turning point for both of them. Neither had ever acknowledged what was reasonable in the other's position. This admission made them feel vulnerable, but it helped deescalate their conflict and turn them into collaborators, working on a common problem.

What you, too, need to see, is that, whatever you're arguing about, there's often some truth in what your partner is saying. It's your job to find it, and affirm it. Your affirmation is likely to pull the two of you back from extreme, self-righteous postures, and bring you closer together.

Ultimately, you both must learn to be good listeners and receive your partner's grievances as gifts in service of the relationship. To renew ties, you have to know each other better, and this means accepting as valid what your partner feels and seriously considering what your partner wants from you. If the two of you can talk openly, without always pouncing on each other or going on the defensive, you'll develop a mechanism for managing conflict that will make you feel more cared for and understood throughout the life of your relationship.

Why You May Not Want to Listen

Let's look at three common assumptions that may reduce your ability to listen to your partner's complaints. (By listening, I mean *intimate* listening, which is not just a willingness to hear your partner's words but a willingness to appreciate your partner's perspective.)

1. "Listening to your complaints is the same as saying, 'You're right.'"
2. "Listening to your complaints is giving you a license to rage."
3. "Listening to your complaints is the same as saying, 'I forgive you.'"

Assumption #1: "Listening to your complaints is the same as saying, 'You're right.'"

Listening doesn't mean you agree; it just means you care enough to try to understand what your partner is saying. If you confuse listening to your partner's message with validating it, you won't listen, and you won't know what you're disputing. Unless you hear your partner's complaints, you can't begin to understand or respond to them.

Assumption #2: "Listening to your complaints is giving you a license to rage."

Some of you may worry that listening will make your partner more combative; if you're the type who feels threatened by conflict, you're not going to want to fan the flames. But listening can be disarming. Empathy—another name for intimate listening—does not intensify conflict, it softens it. Your partner, feeling acknowledged and understood, is likely to relax, trust you more, and respond to you in a more loving way. Try it. You may discover that listening is one of the most powerful resources you have.

Assumption #3: "Listening to your complaints is the same as saying, 'I forgive you.'"

Some of you may have trouble listening because you equate it with forgiving. But don't confuse the two. Listening, as I've said, means only that you're willing to open yourself to your partner's version of the truth, not that you accept it, or that you pardon or exonerate your partner's behavior. Listening can clear a path to forgiveness, but it's only a beginning.

How the Past Affects the Way You Listen Today

As you grew up, you became accustomed to hearing certain messages, implicit or explicit, in the way your family talked to you, or to one another. Some were personally enhancing ("I respect your opinion," "You make sense to me," "We don't have to agree"). Others, like the following, were debilitating:

- "You'd better watch out."
- "Now you've made me good and mad."
- "You're an idiot."
- "You can't make good decisions."
- "I've had it with you."
- "You're unlovable."
- "You don't know what you're talking about."
- "You should be ashamed of yourself."
- "It's your fault."
- "What's wrong with you?"

When your partner speaks to you today, you're prone—programmed, in a sense—to interpret what you hear in these familiar, sometimes dysfunctional ways, thereby distorting your partner's message and losing your ability to respond in an objective and constructive way.

Josh, a fifty-eight-year-old attorney, is a case in point. His father was a bully who micromanaged his every move. Today, when his wife, Amy, speaks to him, he often hears "interference," "control," and "subjugation." Amy insists that she's only

speaking up for herself and trying to be helpful. Though the incidents vary—she might suggest that he forego onions on his sandwich a half hour before a cocktail party or ask him to lower the volume on the hotel TV—the personal meaning that Josh attaches to her words is always the same. He can't talk out his reaction, because he's not aware of how he's contributing to it; all he knows is that Amy makes him feel as manipulated and infantilized as his father did, and that he needs to get away from her to restore his emotional equilibrium. Of course, this solution will not heal them as the couple, or him as an individual.

It's important for you, as it is for Josh, to be aware of your hot buttons, filters, wounds—whatever you call them—because they may lead you to misconstrue what your partner is saying. You need to keep in mind that the message you think you hear may be quite different from the message your partner is trying to send. If you misread your partner (you hear, for example, "I don't like you and I'm leaving you" when your partner is angry or upset), you're likely to react inappropriately (you threaten divorce, for example) and incite your partner to react in ways that confirm your original assumption (that your partner doesn't like you and is leaving).

Knowing that you're vulnerable to interpreting your partner's words according to your own personal themes, you need to step back and ask yourself, "Is there another way of understanding what my partner is telling me; is there another way of processing it? Am I provoking my partner to communicate with me in the way that my parents did, so that I reinforce my early experiences?"

You can check out whether you're interpreting a message accurately by telling your partner, "What you've said makes me feel X (unsupported, belittled, controlled), but I know I tend to feel that way too easily. Am I hearing you correctly?" This gives your partner another chance to explain, and it gives you another chance to listen with an open mind.

Sex Differences in Expressing and Listening to Conflict

Men and women tend to express and listen to conflict in different ways. Although gender differences don't apply to everyone, understanding them may help you communicate more constructively and tolerate responses that might otherwise annoy or upset you.⁴ Here are a few common examples:

1. Men often give advice when women want emotional support. Men view their intervention as loving or helpful. Women usually experience it as condescending or unsympathetic.

2. When men empathize, they often feel foolish or fake. They have difficulty believing that anyone would appreciate or derive any benefit from having them just listen to or validate feelings. Women empathize more naturally, and understand its value.

3. Men tend to get physiologically overwhelmed during emotional confrontations, and withdraw. When tensions rise, so do their pulse rate and blood pressure (a physiologically aversive condition), and they experience a biological need to escape. Women, in contrast, feel closer when they share their complaints, and experience a highly unpleasant arousal of their autonomic nervous system when their male partner withdraws.⁵ A woman whose male partner flees from her whenever she tries to express her anger or pain is forced to make a grim choice: either to speak up and alienate her partner, or to remain silent and feel alienated from herself. "When . . . a woman is furious with her partner for his affairs, his emotional unresponsiveness, or his threats to leave, she may be afraid that if she makes her feelings known he will retaliate with even greater anger or by acting on his threats to leave."⁶ A woman's silence, all too often, leads to depression and a loss of self.

These gender differences in communication are often exacerbated when the hurt partner is a woman and the unfaithful partner is a man. A woman is more likely to want to talk out her pain and, as the hurt partner, to have more pain to talk out. A man is more likely to want to avoid conflict and, as the

unfaithful partner, to want to move on. Each partner relates in a way that frustrates and alienates the other.

For men and women to get around these differences, they have to cut a deal: Men can't avoid conflict; women can't flood their partners with it.

As the man, you must step into the fray and try to empathize with your partner's feelings. You must prove to her that if she speaks to you in a calmer voice for shorter periods of time, you'll work hard to stay engaged and understand her point of view.

As the woman, you must reinforce your partner's efforts by allowing his empathy to reach you and calm you down—and by cutting the discussion short. You should also consider seeing his advice-giving not as an attempt to demean or control you, but as an attempt to be helpful and loving.

"Every time things start to go well between me and Janet," Bill, an unfaithful partner, complained in a couples session, "she brings up my affair and stamps out all the good. I try to listen, but it doesn't seem to help. The hurt never goes away. Should we just keep doing this?"

"You're anxious to move on," I told him, "but when you express optimism, Janet gets scared. She's afraid of being hurt again. She's afraid that you're just trying to sweep what happened under the rug and haven't learned anything from it. She sees your optimism as self-serving and manipulative—a cheap, painless way to be forgiven. Here's what I recommend. You, Bill, must listen to Janet every time she needs to talk about her pain—if that means 5,000 times, then you need to listen 5,000 times. Your willingness to listen may lessen her pain and her need to talk about it. You, Janet, must share not just your grief, but your positive feelings—any warm, loving, hopeful feelings you experience—so that Bill feels encouraged and knows that his efforts to be there for you make a difference. If you, Bill, open yourself to Janet's hurt and anger, and you, Janet, allow yourself to heal, the two of you have a better chance of carving out a future together."

Suggestions

Here's some general advice to keep in mind as you communicate:

- Don't assume that what you're hearing is what your partner is trying to say. You may be hearing only what you know, or expect to hear.
- Learn to be an effective choreographer. Think about where you'd like your relationship to go before you begin talking, and ask yourself, "What do I need to say to get there?" Try to act against old, familiar patterns of communication that no longer serve your interest. For example, instead of turning your partner off with sarcasm ("I guess you wouldn't be interested in what I have to say"), coach yourself to be disarmingly direct ("I'd like to tell you how I feel about this; it's really important to me that you listen closely").
- What you discuss is often less important than how you discuss it. As you speak to each other, don't forget to convey, "I like you, believe in you, am proud of you, care about you. I'm interested in what you have to say and in how you feel."
- Don't jump at your partner's every word; make room for imperfect responses. Be patient and attentive when you know your partner is trying to get through to you. Go beyond the words and try to hear the message behind them.

Numerous communication techniques can help you talk and listen to each other more constructively. Many of them are spelled out in *Marriage Rules*⁷ and *10 Lessons to Transform Your Marriage*.⁸ Here are a few:

- Listen to what your partner has to say without *defending yourself* ("Yes, but . . ."), *minimizing* ("You're really making too much of this"), or *stonewalling* ("I refuse to talk about it").

- Don't overwhelm your partner with diatribes; take turns talking and listening.
- Let your partner finish what he or she is saying; don't interrupt.
- After you've made your point and your partner has paraphrased it, drop the argument, at least for a while.
- Stick to one subject at a time.
- Be specific. Don't say, "You always do this," or "You never do that."
- Criticize what your partner thinks or does; don't attack your partner's character (say, "I can't trust you when you lie to me about running into your old girlfriend," instead of "You're a pathological liar").
- Don't attribute motives to your partner's behavior. (It's better to say, "I believe that . . ." or "My idea is that . . .," instead of "I'm sure that the reason you did X is . . .") Acknowledge that your assumptions are personal and may not be true. This gives your partner a chance to confirm or correct them.
- If your partner's tone is pushing you away, say so, and ask to be spoken to in a calmer or more respectful voice. Don't just walk away or escalate the conflict.
- Look your partner in the eye when you're being talked to; give your partner your full attention.
- If you can't give your partner your undivided attention—you're too busy, tired, upset—say so, and set another time to get together. Then follow through.

It's important to let your partner know what you want to hear. Here are some common requests my patients have made; feel free to add your own:

- "Tell me when you need reassurance. Don't threaten divorce as a way of getting my attention."
- "Tell me when you feel close to me or hopeful about us as a couple."

- "Tell me when you're upset; don't silence your pain."
- "Instead of getting mad, tell me calmly and directly what's bothering you or what you want."
- "Tell me what you're angry or upset about in a respectful way; don't demean me." (It's better to say, "By distorting the truth about me to your parents, you're made it incredibly difficult for me to have a relationship with them," instead of "You're a baby who needs your mommy and daddy.")
- "Talk to me about yourself, and us; don't drag in the affair-person."
- "Be honest when I ask you about the affair-person; don't try to protect my feelings."
- "Tell me how your family talked to you, and how this may affect the way you talk to me today."
- "Tell me what part of my message you agree with."
- "Don't assume I want you to solve my problems unless I ask for help."
- "Apologize openly for how you've hurt me or let me down."
- "Bring up the affair so I don't feel so alone with it."
- "Admit your contribution to our problems."
- "Tell me who knows what about the affair, and work out a plan with me for containing and managing the spread of the news."
- "Don't be afraid to let me see you cry. Don't be afraid to let me know the meaning of your tears."

Communicating openly and authentically is necessary to restore intimacy; so is being physically close to each other. The next chapter helps you to become sexually intimate again in ways that go beyond genital sex. I appreciate how scary the prospect may be of touching again—of letting your partner know you and please you, and of doing the same for your partner. But with your communication skills to help you express your wishes and fears, and your cognitive skills to keep you accurately processing what's happening between the two of you, you're well equipped to enter the bedroom.